HOME VISITING AT-A-GLANCE

WHAT IS HOME VISITING?

Nothing transforms a home and the people in it, quite like the arrival of a new baby. All parents need support during this transition. Home visiting programs are voluntary, home-based programs that pair parents with trained professionals that provide information and support during pregnancy and throughout a specific period of their child's early years. Because home visiting is a method of service delivery, programs can differ dramatically. They vary with respect to the age of the child, the risk status of the family, the range of services offered, the intensity of the home visits, and the content of the curriculum that is used. Furthermore, programs vary in terms of who provides services, how effectively the program is implemented and the range of outcomes observed. What all share is the belief that services delivered in the home will have a positive impact on families and that bolstering parenting practices can have measurable and long-term benefits for children's development.

Home visitors partner with current or expectant moms to encourage them to make lifestyle and behavioral changes. Each home visiting program employs different techniques to assist parents in making changes. Common techniques include didactic instruction, providing connections to services, distributing educational materials, modeling, and coaching. Educational materials may include fact sheets, booklets demonstrating parenting practices (e.g., activities to support motor development), or assignments to practice techniques discussed in home visits. In addition, home visitors may model behaviors during the home visit to provide parents with clear examples of ways to change their parenting practices. Modeling may also occur through videos that are played for parents during home visits. Coaching is another home visiting technique. Home visitors may support parent behavior changes through helping a parent identify an area for change, strategize about concrete steps towards change, and provide support as the parent moves forward with her plan for change. Importantly, techniques employed by home visitors are often used in combination to support the individual needs of parents.

HOW DO FAMILIES GET CONNECTED TO HOME VISITING?

Home visiting programs vary in their recruitment of families. Generally, families are referred to programs though birthing hospitals, doctors' offices, community health clinics, and social service providers, such as WIC. Some families self-refer.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF HOME VISITING?

A child’s future begins before birth.

Home visitors partner with expectant moms to encourage them to engage in behaviors that dramatically decrease their chances of poor birth outcomes including attending regular prenatal care visits, smoking cessation, abstaining from alcohol consumption, and eating a balanced diet. This support does not just save families the emotional cost of these dangerous and expensive conditions; it saves states money too. Every low birth weight or preterm birth costs states between $28,000 and $40,000 in medical care and other related costs compared to $2,800 for a healthy birth. Home visiting programs have been shown to improve birth outcomes.2,3

Stronger bonds, better lives.

Home visiting helps parents find healthy solutions to stressful circumstances by connecting them with needed resources (e.g., safe and stable housing, substance abuse or mental health counseling), as well as by teaching them to build positive, loving relationships with their children. Research shows that kids who have strong bonds with their parents have better lifelong emotional health and have a lower risk of later problems, including alcoholism, depression, eating disorders, heart disease, cancer and other chronic illnesses.4 Studies have also found that mothers who participate in home visiting programs are more sensitive to and supportive of their children5, and they reported less stress than those in the control group.6 One review of home visiting programs found significant improvements in parenting behaviors and attitudes.7

Healthy & Safe Home

The demands of raising an infant or toddler can prove challenging for even the best prepared parent. In 2008, there were more than 750,000 victims of child abuse or neglect in the United States, and almost half of the abuse-related fatalities were babies less than one year old.8 By helping parents understand their children's development, set realistic expectations for behavior and improve the safety of their homes, home visiting programs have been shown to cut incidences of child abuse and neglect in half.9
Foundation for Lifelong Learning

Babies start learning from the day they are born, but they need their parents to guide them. By teaching parents to stimulate their children’s early learning, home visiting programs help build critical pre-literacy skills and improve achievement test scores. Children of home visiting participants have shown higher cognitive and vocabulary scores, as well as an increased ability to complete work on time and work cooperatively with others. 10,11

Lasting Benefits

By encouraging parents to continue their education, apply for jobs and improve relationships with the people in their lives, home visitors help families increase their ability to help themselves through skill building and to build a lasting stable future for their children. First years after their participation in a nurse home visiting program, mothers had increased employment, reduction in welfare use, and an increase in father’s presence. 12

Cost Savings

Tax payers reap the benefit when many of our nation’s costliest social and health related problems (e.g., poor birth outcomes, school failure, child abuse, etc.) are prevented. Cost benefits from home visiting programs include less spending on social welfare and the justice system, an increased tax base and self-sufficiency, and tangible and intangible savings to victims of crime. 13

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WELCOME BABY

Welcome Baby is a locally developed home visiting program for pregnant women and new mothers in Los Angeles County that provides information, support and a trusted partner to help them through pregnancy and early parenthood. Welcome Baby provides education on maternal and child health, child development and safety via modeling, coaching, printed materials and didactic instruction. The program also links mothers to social supports and concrete services.

Mothers are recruited into Welcome Baby either prenatally or immediately after giving birth. Prenatal recruitment is conducted by a Recruitment Specialist who establishes a referral network (e.g., health centers, private health care providers, WIC centers) and conducts outreach directed at pregnant women by visiting locations that pregnant women frequent (e.g., community events, hospital tours, health centers). All prenatal recruitment efforts occur within Best Start Communities. Postpartum recruitment is conducted by a Hospital Liaison, who visits women in the hospital after they have given birth.

All Welcome Baby participants are screened for risk level at the hospital visit using the Modified Bridges for Newborns Screening Tool. (The risk score incorporates demographic characteristics, medical problems and psychosocial factors.) Scores on this screening tool and the whether the mother lives in a Best Start Community determine the level of service a mother receives. The triaging structure is as follows:

- Best Start Community member + low to moderate risk score → Welcome Baby
- Best Start Community member + high risk score → intensive home visiting program
- Non-Best Start Community member + low to moderate risk score → educational materials and/or referrals
- Non-Best Start Community member + high risk score → abbreviated version of Welcome Baby

The Welcome Baby home visiting program has been operating in the Metro LA Best Start Community since 2009. A longitudinal, quasi-experimental study of child and family outcomes is ongoing. In this study, data from a sample of Welcome Baby participants in Metro LA is compared to a sample of mothers who were recruited from the local WIC office. Child and family outcomes are assessed at 12-, 24-, and 36-months postpartum. Data collection and analysis are complete for the first two time points and promising findings have emerged.

- High percentages of Welcome Baby infants received **regular medical care** at the 12-month postpartum visit:
  - 98% of Welcome Baby infants have health care coverage
99% of Welcome Baby infants have attended all of their well-baby visits
95% of Welcome Baby infants received on-time immunizations

- **Regular medical care** was slightly lower at the 24-month postpartum visit, but still quite high:
  - 91.5% of Welcome Baby children had health care coverage in the past year
  - 96.5% of Welcome Baby children went to their 18-month well baby visit
  - 87.5% of Welcome Baby children received on-time immunizations

- **Breastfeeding** outcomes are encouraging:
  - Mothers who received Welcome Baby were more likely to have breastfed exclusively during the first 4 months of life
  - Participation in more Welcome Baby sessions was associated with an increase in the number of months a mother breastfed
- At 12 and 24-months postpartum, families who participated in Welcome Baby score higher than comparison families on measures of the **quality of the home environment**:
  - More learning materials (e.g., books, developmentally appropriate toys) are available in Welcome Baby homes
  - Welcome Baby parents report engaging in more home learning activities (e.g., telling stories, singing songs) with their children
- Mothers who received Welcome Baby were more **responsive and encouraging towards their children** at 24 months postpartum than mothers who did not receive Welcome Baby.
- At 24 months postpartum, children in the Welcome Baby group **watched less television** than children in the comparison group – about 3 hours less per week.

**OPPORTUNITIES**

Opportunities exist for funding home visiting programs, including the federal MIECHV program which supports evidence-based home visiting programs. Additionally, there are 6 states which receive Medicaid funding to support home visiting programs (Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Vermont and Washington). Another potential funding source for home visiting programs is insurance companies.

Programs supporting parents as they welcome a new baby into their lives are critical for laying the foundation for children’s healthy development. States should invest in home visiting programs that offer families access to information about their child’s health, development and safety needs as well as resources to go back to school and find stable jobs. Fostering positive parenting skills and family responsibility and health today sows the seeds for safer, healthier children who are better prepared to learn tomorrow.

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6 Administration for Children and Families, “Program Models in Early Head Start: Research to Practice Brief” (accessed April 7, 2010).